Recovering the real for news photography

‘Ever since its invention more than 150 years ago, photography has been seen as a medium of truth and unassailable accuracy’, the art critic Andy Grundberg argued in *The New York Times* in 1990. Convinced ‘the veracity of photographic reality was being radi- cally challenged’ by the ‘menace’ of ‘computer imaging’, he pointed out ‘electronic tech- nology that allows anyone to alter a photographic image at will’ made it easy ‘to recompose and combine photographic images, and to do so in a way that is virtually undetectable’. The implications, he warned *Times* readers, were profound:

In the future, readers of newspapers and magazines will probably view news pictures more as illustrations than as reportage, since they will be well aware that they can no longer distinguish between a genuine image and one that has been manipulated. Even if news photographers and editors resist the temptations of electronic manipulation, as they are likely to do, the credibility of all reproduced images will be diminished by a climate of reduced expectations. In short, photographs will not seem as real as they once did. (Grundberg, 1990)

Read from today’s vantage point, Grundberg’s intervention is remarkable for the way it anticipates issues currently confronting visual journalism’s commitment to document- ing the real. The authority of news imagery is being severely tested in a climate of uncer- tainty, its dependence – to echo his words – on ‘the widespread acceptance of photographs as truth’ being wracked by the ‘virus of manipulation’. Precisely what happens to news photography when members of the public cease to believe it capable of providing ‘neu- tral records of reality’ was an open question for Grundberg, and one which concerns us here.

Turning back the clock on our ‘post-truth’ era of ‘fake news’ and ‘alternative facts’, this essay explores the consolidation of visual conventions perceived to be consistent with photojournalism’s nascent development, when pragmatic appeals to objectivity as a normative ideal helped to affirm, repair and police its professional boundaries. To better understand how and why this consolidation transpired, we elucidate intersecting tensions

in photography's claim to epistemic authority – and, in so doing, encourage a revisioning of photojournalism's futures in the face of persistent criticisms regarding its integrity.

Seeing truth

The refrain 'the camera never lies' speaks to the popular perception – or, more to the point, mythology – emergent in the early years of photography, where its claim to afford an 'objective reflection of reality' was typically counterpoised against the artis- tic subjectivities ascribed to visual media such as drawing, painting or engraving. Practitioners of photography were acutely aware that the celebrated indexical status of the image invited scepticism, yet the 'visible reality' captured by the 'camera's eye' proved formidably difficult to challenge from the mid-1850s onwards. For those pre- disposed to accept photography's instantiation of the real as 'mirror-like', the pre- sumed impartiality of daguerreotypy became bound-up in ideas about the nature of truth and morality.

Historians of science concerned with the ascent of photography's perceived fidelity to the real have recognised the significance of discussions regarding scientific image-mak- ing in the mid-19th century for early formulations of its provenance. The advent of what gradually comes to be recognised as 'objectivity' anticipated a greater emphasis being placed on trained judgement, Daston and Galison (2007) point out, displacing in its wake truth-to-nature, namely, naturalists' belief in a universal truth extracted from what the naked eye can observe. Admonished to keep personal preconceptions in careful check, scientists espoused the epistemic virtues inscribed in emergent, self-consciously 'objec- tive' ways of producing images ostensibly 'untouched by human hands' so as to avoid, as much as possible, the taint of subjectivity. Daston and Galison (2007) elaborate the concept of 'mechanical objectivity' to characterise this guiding ideal of scientific repre- sentation, by which they mean 'the insistent drive to repress the wilful intervention of the artist-author, and to put in its stead a set of procedures that would, as it were, move nature to the page through a strict protocol, if not automatically' (p. 121). While this ideal was imperfectly realised by photography, its status as a scientific medium was underwritten by its proclaimed capacity to converge scientific technique ('absolute material exacti- tude') with moral vision in the making of objective images.

Over the latter decades of the 19th century, pictorial objectivism increasingly turned inward towards self-surveillance, an ethical injunction to exercise self-control by prior- itising the procedural over and above the interpretive to evade the accusation of subjec- tive bias (see also Dinius, 2012). To the extent photography was promoted as a visual expression of mechanical objectivity, this ambition would give its priorities shape and direction, however elusive their achievement.

Przyblyski (1995) describes ‘the growing tendency throughout the 1860s and 1870s to turn the camera upon contemporary events, as well as to the popular desire that the camera, cumbersome and slow as it was, be there as significant events were happening’ (pp. 256–257). The medium’s perceived propen- sity for ‘truth-telling’ seemed ‘dumbly mechanistic’, she maintains, in part because it was incapable of recording movement, but also because appropriate narrative cues and representational codes were taking time to consolidate in inchoate cultures of innovation and experimentation.

Such issues were thrown into ever sharper relief at the turn of the century, the early years of which witnessed significant technical advances (portable cameras, faster shut- ter-speeds, more sensitive emulsions, advances in processing and reproduction tech- niques, etc.) widely credited with improving the camera's claim to authentic vision for documentary relay. Sadakichi Hartmann's 1904 essay, 'A Plea for Straight Photography', spoke to the camera's vaunted objectivity by criticising photographers striving to obtain the 'results of the painter, the etcher, and the lithographer', insisting that they should 'work straight' because 'legitimate photographic methods are the great expressional instrument for a straightforward depiction of the pictorial beauties of life and nature'. To abandon photography's 'superiorities in order to aim at the technical qualities of other arts is unwise', he believed, 'because the loss is surely greater than the gain' (Hartmann, 1904: 186). It was precisely these 'superiorities' which underwrote news photography's growing investment in the ideal of objectivity, and its visual embodiment as a fact-based medium with considerable popular – and thereby commercial – appeal for reportage.

By the 1920s, with the term 'photojournalism' beginning to claim a purchase on 'pictorial' journalism's vocabulary, the impetus to define the 'journalistic' in sharp con- tradistinction to the 'artistic' was increasingly accepted. 'Photographs have the kind of authority over imagination today, which the printed word had yesterday, and the spoken word before that', Walter Lippmann (1922) observed. 'They seem utterly real. They come, we imagine, directly to us without human meddling, and they are the most effort- less food for the mind conceivable' (p. 61). Still, he cautioned, an idea conveyed by an image will not be 'fully our own until we have identified ourselves with some aspect of the picture', which requires some degree of empathy, even though it 'may be almost infinitely subtle and symbolic' (Lippmann, 1922: 105). Through personal attachments of feelings, Lippmann surmised, the significance of imagery will resonate. 'As our minds become more deeply aware of their own subjectivism, we find a zest in objective method that is not otherwise there', consistent with the recognition that the 'facts we see depend on where we are placed, and the habits of our eyes' (1922: 256, 54). Stated another way, '[w]e do not see what our eyes are not accustomed to take into account' (1922: 78), a telling turn of phrase underscoring the selective, socially material nature of vision. It also illuminates an inherent paradox, namely, objectivity's epistemic authority will be most likely regarded as persuasive to the extent it appears not to be proffering a perspective at all.

Digital visions

To close, this 'zest in objective method' may seem anachronistic to some practitioners today, yet it remains a vital touchstone of

professionalism for others. Given how fiercely the evidential status of digital visuals can be contested – with disputes over the 'accepta- ble limits of Photoshop' overtaken by politically acrimonious allegations regarding 'fake news' manipulation and disinformation – it is hardly surprising that so many news pho- tographers adopt defensive stances. This needs to change. An imperative first step, it fol- lows from above, is to invite proactive dialogue and debate over how best to recalibrate photography's claim to the real in the public service of truth-telling. To challenge norma- tive shibboleths is easier said than done, but it is in historically informed re-craftings of

objectivity's guiding tenets that alternative modes of visual reportage will inspire new repertoires of possibility.

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